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Sandinista War on Indians

As one of the harshest critics of the late Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza, I feel no qualms about faulting his supposedly democratic successors for the same violations of decency that led me to criticize his oppressive regime.

Unfortunately, the Sandinista rebels who succeeded in overthrowing Somoza's brutal regime have not lived up to their claims of being humane champions of the downtrodden Nicaraguan people. In their own way, the Sandinistas have proven to be as cruel toward at least one segment of the Nicaraguan population as Somoza ever was.

The victims are the primitive Miskito Indians, who have the misfortune to live in the northern part of Nicaragua, along the border with Honduras.

Intelligence reports chronicle the killing of dozens of Indians, the imprisonment of hundreds more and the forced relocation of thousands.

From the very beginning of the Sandinistas' successful revolution in 1979, the Miskitos resisted the Marxist-oriented government's threat to their life style. They resented the leftist ideology, and such possibly well-intentioned programs as literacy classes.

Like any insecure revolutionary regime, the Sandinistas viewed the Miskitos' resistance to directives from the central government as evidence of rebellion, or even loyalty to ex-Somoza forces in exile. The Indians' location—in the northeast corner of Nicaragua near the Honduran border, across which many of Somoza's defeated national guard troops had fled to safety—made them naturally suspect to Sandinista leaders.

Occasional outbreaks of violence, perhaps fueled by the Somozan exiles, led the Sandinistas to consider the Miskitos a threat to the revolutionary regime. Their suspicions of the Indian tribesmen became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Miskito leaders were imprisoned beginning in early 1981.

Then, last December, the Managua regime apparently decided to get really tough. Claiming that they were putting down "counterrevolutionaries," the Sandinistas moved in.

At least 100, and probably more, Miskitos were killed as the Sandinistas tried to settle the Indian problem for good. "The situation on the east coast is rapidly deteriorating," according to one State Department cable. One source went so far as to say that the Sandinistas "are bent on wiping out the Miskitos, many of whom have fled to Honduras or Costa Rica to escape reported massacres."

Another source considered reliable by the State Department said that "early in January, bodies began floating downriver" past one Miskito village. "He [the source] also told of a rumor that the FSLN [Sandinistas] had rounded up a group of males, lined them up on a barge on the river, shot them and allowed them to float downriver," the report said. "He could not personally verify the reasons for the deaths, but he personally observed the bodies floating in the river."

The secret cable also told of this episode:

"(Sandinistas) entered the town of Sandy Bay, via foot and boat, to round up suspected members of a counter-revolutionary group . . . The Sandinistas herded most of the population to the town square, forcing them one by one to enter the Moravian church. Inside, each was shown a list of names and asked if he knew anyone on the list. Although the names of most of the men of Sandy Bay appeared on the list, none claimed to know anyone on the list."

After holding 40 men in the church overnight, the Sandinistas took them to another town, Puerto Cabezas. That same night, the Sandinistas reportedly torched a small house believed to be a hangout for counter-revolutionaries. Most of the Sandy Bay villagers fled.

Other reports include stories of Miskitos who barely escaped with their lives while fellow villagers were shot down by the Sandinistas. One Indian leader has produced a list of more than 250 Miskitos known to have been killed, and thousands more who cannot be accounted for.